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著者	KHALMIRZAEVA Saida
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TALES OF BLIND BIWA PLAYERS: KIKUCHI KUZURE

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Not much is known about the past activities of blind biwa players from Kyushu. During the twentieth century a number of researchers and folklorists, such as Tanabe Hisao, Kimura Yūshō, Kimura Rirō, Nomura (Ga) Machiko, Narita Mamoru, Hyōdō Hiromi and Hugh de Ferranti, collected data on blind biwa players in various regions of Kyushu, made recordings of their tales and conducted detailed research on the history and nature of their tradition. Despite these efforts to document and publicize the tradition of blind biwa players from Kyushu through introduction of its representatives and their repertory, the tradition ended around the end of the twentieth century.¹

The most extensively documented individual was Yamashika Yoshiyuki (山鹿良之, 1901-1996), one of the last representatives of the tradition of blind biwa players, who was known among researchers and folklorists for his skill in performing and an abundant repertory that included rites and a great many tales. Yamashika was born in 1901 in a farmer family in Ōhara of Tamana District, the present-day Kobaru of Nankan, Kumamoto Prefecture. Yamashika lost the sight in his left eye at the age of four. At the age of twenty-two Yamashika apprenticed with a biwa player named Ezaki Shotarō (江崎初太郎) from Amakusa. From his teacher Yamashika learned tales, such as *Miyako Gassen Chikushi Kudari* (都合戦筑紫下り), *Kikuchi Kuzure* (菊池くづれ), *Kugami Gassen* (くがみ合戦), *Owari Sōdō* (尾張騒動), *Sumidagawa* (隅田川) and *Mochi Gassen* (餅合戦). After three years Yamashika returned home. He was not capable of doing much farm work because his eyesight had deteriorated further by then. Yamashika decided to become a professional biwa player and dedicate his life to storytelling. However, in order to do so he had to increase the number of pieces in his repertory. For about a year Yamashika followed a performer named Mori Yoichi (森与一). Yamashika learned from him tales, such as *Ichi no Tani* (一の谷), *Ko-Atsumori* (小敦盛), *Azekakehime* (あぜかけ姫), *Shuntokumaru* (俊徳丸) and *Oguri Hangan* (小栗判官). Yamashika learned *hashira-date* (柱立て), which is performed during the *Watamashi* (わたまし), from a performer named Kyōbutsu (教仏), and *sanjū-butsu* (or *sanjū hotoke*) (三十仏) from Sakamoto Saichi (坂本さいち). Yamashika kept learning tales and pieces for ritual performances from other biwa players and ritualists throughout his early performing life. From around 1970 he became one of the most popular biwa players from Kyushu due to his many public performances organized by local and central organizations, and publications that elucidated some aspects of the performer's life and the tradition he represented and practiced throughout his life.²

The translation of one tale from his repertory, *Kikuchi Kuzure* (菊池くづれ), is presented in this paper.

I. KIKUCHI KUZURE

1. Introduction of *Kikuchi Kuzure*

The secular repertory of the blind biwa players is represented by *hauta* 端歌, short songs delivered in the traditional seven-five-syllable meter, and *danmono* 段物, long tales. *Kikuchi Kuzure* was one of the longest *danmono* tales in

¹ In 1973 the tradition received designation as an Intangible Cultural Asset.

² For more detailed information on Yamashika's life and repertory, see Nomura (Ga) 1972, 2007; Hyōdō 1991, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2009; de Ferranti 1997, 2003, 2009.

Yamashika's repertory. It was comprised of ten to twelve parts called *dan*.³ The translation presented in this paper (the first to third *dan*) is based on the text transcription of the performance by Yamashika recorded some time between 1970 and 1972. The recording and transcription was made by Nomura (Ga) Machiko and included in 2007 *Higobiwa katari-shū*.

Kikuchi Kuzure is a tale related to historical battles between warriors of Kyushu in sixteenth-century Japan. It is centered on the depiction of the tragic destiny of Saburōmaru, a young son of Lord Akahoshi. The story starts with an explanation of the reasons why Saburōmaru left his home castle and went to Lord Takanobu's. Lord Takanobu who was the ruler of Hizen,⁴ Higo⁵ and Chikugo⁶ provinces was afraid of treason, which is why he ordered all of his vassals to send one of their children as a hostage to his castle. Saburōmaru was sent to Lord Takanobu's castle as a hostage as well. And there, due to his beauty and talents, he became a target of the hate of Kumajūmaru and his father, Lord Kumabe. Soon Saburōmaru fell victim to slander, which is why his nine-year-old sister Yasohime became a hostage of Lord Takanobu as well. The lord murdered both Saburōmaru and Yasohime, and this brought about a war between Satsuma and Hizen provinces. Eventually, the death of Saburōmaru and Yasohime was avenged. Lord Akahoshi killed the plotters, Kumajūmaru and his father Lord Kumabe.

2. Translation of *Kikuchi Kuzure*

First *dan*

Those were the days of the lord Oda Nobunaga.⁷ He pacified the warriors of Japan and turned into his allies those who followed him, made himself the lord of the country and resided in the castle of Ishiyama. In those days among the lords appointed to control Kyushu there was a man by the name Oda Ryūzōji Takanobu,⁸ the governor of Yamashiro.⁹ He was a cousin of the lord Nobunaga and resided in the castle of Saga in Hizen of Kyushu.

And among his vassals there were Nabeshima Terutsuna, the Governor of Kaga,¹⁰ Jinbaya Hizen, Takeo no Tō, Dohi no Egami, Hanada of the Ministry of Popular Affairs, Gojō Kumabe, the governor of Tajima,¹¹ a famous vassal by the name of Akahoshi Miyauchi, the lord of the castle of Kikuchi Waifu from Higo. There were also Ogawa, Mizushima, Kaishima, Musashi of Ogawa, and there were even more, such as Arima, Arishima, the governor of Mizushima. There were many and many of those who served the lord.¹² The power of the lord Takanobu was rising like the morning sun.

I don't know if he was overcome by his prosperity, but one day he summoned all of his vassals and said: "My servants, even though your loyalty to me has been proven already, in days like these when treason can happen at any minute, I will take a hostage from each and everyone of you who have families. Even if someone wants to plot treason, the love for his children will stop him from doing so. I think this is the way of the world. Let my will be known to everyone!" Surprised by the lord's order people immediately put the order into writing and circulated it

³ A *dan* is a section of a narrative piece presenting a major episode in the tale.

⁴ Hizen, Hizen-no-kuni 肥前の国, was an old province located in the present-day Okayama Prefecture.

⁵ Higo, Higo-no-kuni 肥後の国, was an old province located in the present-day Kumamoto Prefecture.

⁶ Chikugo, Chikugo-no-kuni 筑後の国, was an old province located in the present-day Fukuoka Prefecture.

⁷ Oda Nobunaga 織田信長 (1534-1582) was a Japanese warrior and government official who overthrew the Muromachi shogunate 室町幕府 (1338-1573), and ended a long period of feudal wars, the Sengoku period 戦国時代 (Warring States period) by unifying half of the provinces in Japan under his rule.

⁸ Oda Ryūzōji Takanobu 織田竜造寺隆信 (1530-1584) was a Japanese feudal lord during the Sengoku period.

⁹ Yamashiro, Yamashiro-no-kuni 山城の国, was an old province located in the present-day Kyoto Prefecture.

¹⁰ Kaga, Kaga-no-kuni 加賀の国, was an old province of Japan located in the southern part of the present-day Ishikawa Prefecture.

¹¹ Tajima, Tajima-no-kuni 但馬の国, was an old province of Japan located in the northern part of the present-day Hyōgo Prefecture.

¹² Most of the names are given partially in the original text (performance), which is why only the sound will be shown in the translation. The two names appearing here are of particular importance in the story: Gojō Kumabe 五条隈部 and Akahoshi Miyauchi 赤星宮内.

among the vassals. On seeing the letter, the vassals who had families hurried to send their children to the lord, thinking: “If I send my child to the lord, I will be able to live in prosperity. I will send my child to our ruler! I will give my child to His Grace!” First was sent the son of Lord Jinbaya, a youth of fifteen named Torawakamaru. The next was the son of Musashi of Ogawa, a youth of ten named Kikuwakamaru. Gamaike-zaemon had a son of eight named Chiyowakamaru. Next Tajiri Naozumi had an only son named Chiwakamaru. There was nothing dearer in the heaven or on the earth to the lord. Chiwakamaru was only three and was not yet able to serve the lord properly. He was sent to the lord together with his nanny and attendant. Gojō Kumabe had a son named Kumajūmaru of fifteen. Kumajūmaru was sent to the lord. Ten of thousands of people sent their children to the lord: those who had daughters sent their daughters, those who had sons sent their sons. Particularly noticeable among them was the son of Gojō Kumabe named Kumajūmaru, a youth of fifteen who excelled everyone in appearance and everything else. Lord Takanobu saw him and thought: “There will probably not be another one with such a great appearance.” And so Kumajūmaru became a personal attendant of the lord and lived happily in his realm.

And here the story changes. Akahoshi of Kikuchi from Higo had a son named Saburōmaru. Since Lord Takanobu had not heard anything from him, he beckoned Tajiri Naozumi and said: “Naozumi, why has Akahoshi of Kikuchi from Higo not sent me a hostage, even though he has two children? Is he going to string two bows at the same time? Is he plotting treason? I will have to put you to trouble. Please, go to Kikuchi of Higo and find out what Akahoshi has in his mind.” “As you wish,” said Naozumi. He immediately made all his preparations, mounted on his horse and headed to the castle of Kikuchi Waifu in Higo leaving behind Saga of Hizen.

So after a long trip of three days he arrived at the house of Akahoshi of Kikuchi. He tied down his horse in front of the gate and started calling someone: “Please, please!” “I was thinking who that could be. It is you, Lord Naozumi. Don’t stay there at the entrance! Come in, come in!” Naozumi answered: “I am afraid to tell you this, but I am here for a reason. I came here at the order of the lord of Hizen who said: “Even though there are two children in this family neither of them has been sent to me. Is he going to string two bows at the same time? Is he plotting treason? Go and find out!” That is why I have come!” “Is that so? Please, wait for a while.” He was guided into the inner room. Lord Akahoshi Miyauchi had been sick for a while, so he slowly came out in his night clothes rapidly tightening his *obi*¹³ He said: “It is so unexpected to see you, Lord Naozumi! You must be exhausted to have travelled all this way from Saga of Hizen as a messenger.” “It is unexpected, Lord Akahoshi! The reason for me to come here today is just as I explained previously,” answered Naozumi. “I see. I see. As the lord says, I do have two children. I am sick, and even though I saw the letter, I have not sent either to the lord. As soon as I recover, I will accompany one of the two, my eldest son Saburō or his younger sister Yasohime to the castle of Saga in Hizen. Then I will ask you to take care of everything. But until then let me refrain from doing anything!” he said, and Naozumi found himself starting to cry. “I see, Lord Akahoshi. You feel this way even though you have two children. And I, Naozumi who is telling you this, only have one child of only three. There is nothing dearer either in the heaven or on the earth to me than this child. Since he cannot even serve the lord properly, I sent him with his nanny and an attendant. Ever since, I keep wondering: “Will he be killed or blamed for something? There are no limits to parental love.” The two of them were conversing with tears in their eyes, when...

The paper sliding door of the inner room was opened. “I am sorry, Lord Naozumi. It has been some time. I am the son of the owner of this house, Saburō. Father, I have heard everything Lord Tajiri told you from the other room. If the lord of Hizen wishes me to serve him, as a person born into a samurai family, I will go for my lord not only to Saga, but even to China. Please, give me leave to go!” Saburō said. “Is it so, Saburōmaru? What else could I expect from the son of Miyauchi? If that is your wish, then start preparing immediately and accompany Lord Tajiri to the castle of Saga!” Akahoshi said. Saburō was really happy to hear this. “Thank you!” said Saburō and headed to his room. Once in his room, he called Takewakamaru and said: “Listen carefully, Takewakamaru. I am going to the

¹³ *Obi* 帯 is a broad sash tied over kimono.

castle of Saga. I know that is a burden, but, please, start preparations to accompany me.” Even though Takewakamaru did not want to do what he had been told, since he could not disobey his lord’s order, he told the attendants to start preparations. The sixteen attendants all made their own preparations. And Saburōmaru’s appearance was truly radiant. He put on white silk and had a kimono of the color of a mountain dove. He wore a pair of a long and a short swords over a *sendaihora hakama*.¹⁴ He put on a crested kimono, and accompanied by the sixteen attendants, went to see his father. “Let me speak, Father. This is me, your son, Saburō. I will leave you and go to the castle of Saga. Give me your permission to leave!” he said. Akahoshi said: “Oh, Saburōmaru, as soon as all the preparations are made, go without any further delay. But before you leave, there is something I would like to tell you. In a place like Saga of Hizen there are a lot of compatriots. Don’t do anything to make yourself stand out. Don’t be hated by anyone, never doubt the lord. There is something else. Never let yourself go to alcohol and women. If you do, you will lose your life. Be careful! This is all I wanted to tell you, and there is nothing more to add. Lord Naozumi, since I am sending my son who is still so young to the castle of Saga, I am asking you to take care of everything.” Lord Tajiri Naozumi said: “Lord Miyauchi, as long as Naozumi is there, there is no need for you to worry about your son Saburō. Saburō, let’s go! Goodbye, Lord Akahoshi!” “Goodbye. Please, take care of everything! Goodbye!” said Akahoshi. “Goodbye, Father! Goodbye, Mother!” so Saburō bid farewell to his parents, and leaving the castle of Kikuchi Waifu behind, started his long way with Lord Naozumi.

Second dan

After a long travel Saburō arrived at the castle of Hizen. At the castle of Hizen he was shown into the lord’s presence. Saburō said: “My Lord, I am the son of Kikuchi Akahoshi from Higo, Saburōmaru. Please, treat me kindly!” “I was wondering who you could be. So you are the son of Akahoshi of Kikuchi from Higo. It is fine. Come closer! Oh, Saburōmaru! Till now I was sure that there was no one who would exceed Kumajūmaru, the son of Gojō Kumabe. But to compare the charms of Saburōmaru to that of Kumajūmaru is the same as to compare snow to ash. Saburōmaru is the snow, and Kumajūmaru is the ash. And since that was their first meeting, sake and a *sakazuki*¹⁵ were brought for him to take a pledge of loyalty. The *sakazuki* was filled and emptied by the lord, and then it was given to Saburōmaru. Saburōmaru received the *sakazuki* and after having emptied it three times, he returned it saying: “My Lord!” And Lord Takanobu... Saburōmaru was appointed as a chamber attendant of the lord the day he arrived, and since that day he lived happily, but...

In about five days Lord Takanobu who had nothing special to do called upon his personal attendant Kumajūmaru and his chamber attendant Saburōmaru and got them to sing songs and make up poems, play chess, *go*¹⁶ and *sugoroku*.¹⁷ Kumajūmaru was fifteen, while Saburōmaru was only twelve. Fifteen-year-old Kumajūmaru lost to twelve-year-old Saburōmaru at making poems, *sugoroku* and at chess. There was absolutely nothing he won at. One day Lord Takanobu said: “It is not a competition, but today I want you two to practice kendo in my garden.” Upon the order the two immediately entered the garden of the castle. Upon hearing this, all the vassals hurried to the garden with the words: “Lord Kumajū... and Lord Saburō... are competing. I want to see it! It must be a marvelous show. I want to see it! I want to watch the show!” And there gathered so many people that they resembled a mountain. Surrounded by the shouting crowd, the two, Kumajūmaru and Saburōmaru, greeted each other according to the etiquette of the bamboo sword. Fifteen-year-old Kumajūmaru fought as hard as he could, but was badly beaten by Saburōmaru, and as a result completely disgraced. Kumajūmaru was covered in tears. Lord Takanobu noticed his disappointment and said: “So the match is over. Now, the two of you, come closer!” Dusting himself, Saburōmaru

¹⁴ *Sendaihora hakama* 仙台平袴 is a *hakama* made from the *hakama* fabric produced in Sendaihora District of Miyagi Prefecture.

¹⁵ *Sakazuki* 盃 is a sake cup.

¹⁶ *Go* 碁 is a board game for two players, in which the aim is to surround more territory than the opponent.

¹⁷ *Sugoroku* 双六 is a board game for two players similar to backgammon.

approached the lord. Kumajūmaru, covered in tears, was weeping for a while, thinking: “I lost at songs and poems, I lost at *go* and chess, and today in front of all these people I lost again. Nothing is as mortifying as loosing at kendo, which is the most important thing for a warrior. How shameful!” But he also approached the lord. They greeted each other and the lord said: “Kumajūmaru, Saburōmaru, the practice today was marvelous. You really raised my spirit. Wonderful, wonderful! But, Kumajūmaru, do not think that you have lost. You are fifteen, and Saburō is twelve. There is no way Saburō, who is three years younger, could have won. You are the real warrior who lost on purpose just to let Saburōmaru enjoy a little victory. You are indeed the son of a samurai! Do not think that you have lost! And, Saburō, you should not really think that you could have won today. You are twelve, and Kumajūmaru is fifteen. There is no way you could have beaten Kumajūmaru. Kumajūmaru lost on purpose just to let you enjoy a little victory. Do not think that you have won! In order to make you forget the regrets of the day, I will give you the *sakazuki*.” He held out the *sakazuki* with his two hands, and the two received it. After gladly emptying it three times, they returned it to the lord. Saburōmaru went back to the chamber, and the day was over in peace.

And so the days were passing in amusement. One day Lord Takanobu thought: “This Saburō is just so intelligent. Despite his young age, he is really smart. What could be better than making a person like Saburō a lord’s personal attendant? He must be one of those who are called heroes in this world.” I do not know if it was Takanobu who decided what this world should have been like, but one day Lord Takanobu got extremely angry with Kumajūmaru for a slight misuse of words. “Kumajūmaru, you are very impolite! A stupid youth like you cannot serve a lord. Go immediately to the doorkeepers!” So Kumajūmaru was sent off and became a doorkeeper, while Saburōmaru became the lord’s personal attendant. And there was nothing about Saburō the lord did not like, whether it was the way he served tea or anything else. Kumajūmaru, who was reduced to the rank of a doorkeeper, thought about it all while he stood and sat there: “Yesterday and even today in the morning out of all the people I was the one attending the lord. There are so many different posts. Why should I have been made a doorkeeper? There is no one in this world who I hate as much as I hate this Saburō, the son of Akahoshi of Kikuchi from Higo. Somehow I will kill him and take my own life with the same sword! This is what I will do.” Determined to accomplish his plan, Kumajūmaru was waiting for the right moment. In the middle of the night he crept into the building, slid the door to the inner room and looked into: Lord Takanobu, neither a God nor a Buddha, had apparently got tired during the day, and Saburō, the two, master and servant, snoring loudly, were both sound asleep. Gladly he slipped into the house, stood astride Saburōmaru, pulled out one of his swords, held it downward over Saburōmaru’s vital organs and was about to stab him through, but thought: “Wait a moment. Killing Saburōmaru and then committing ritual suicide is the way of the warrior. But if I die this way, nobody will know which of us, Kumajūmaru or Saburō, was right and which was wrong. If so, even though I know that it is not really a good thing to do, I had better pretend to be injured and sick, return home and tell my father all about this. I do not know how my father will react, but if he is a true warrior, he will hate the enemy of his son, Saburō, the same way I do. My father will certainly kill him. And till then I have to keep this body of mine safe.” So he crept out of the room and went back to the hall. The next day he claimed to be sick. He was told: “Oh, you are sick. If so, then return home, get well there and come back.” Glad to hear this, he bid farewell to all the servants and the lord.

Third dan

At the house of Kumabe, where he returned, Kumajūmaru said to his father standing at the entrance: “Father, please forgive me!” “I was wondering who that could be. It is you, my son. It has been a while. You have come from the lord. You must have had a hard time. Come in quickly!” these were the words of a father full of tenderness and love. “Wife, your son is back after a long absence. Bring here the best sake!” he said. The father and the mother asked him to enter the inner room, but Kumajūmaru did not move, and tears started running down his cheeks. His father Kumabe was surprised to see this and asked his son: “What is wrong, Kumajūmaru? Why do you look this way? Is

there something bothering you? Tell me!” Upon hearing this, he said: “Father, there is a deep reason. You know well that I was a personal attendant.” “Of course, of course, your father is only too well aware that you were a personal attendant,” Kumabe said. “I was successfully doing my job, when that Saburō, the son of Akahoshi of Kikuchi appeared. Then the lord said: “Till now I did not imagine such a beautiful youth could exist. Saburō is just so beautiful. I thought there was no one more beautiful than Kumajūmaru, but if you compare the looks of Saburō to those of Kumajūmaru, they differ like snow and ash. Kumajūmaru is the ash, and Saburōmaru is the snow.” And Saburō was appointed a chamber attendant. And that was fine, but then we were asked to compose songs and poems and play chess. I was beaten at singing, *sugoroku* and chess. Moreover, we were asked to compete at kendo, which is the most important thing for a warrior, and to my deepest regret I was the one to lose. That is why one day the lord said: “A fool like you cannot be a personal attendant of a lord!” And I was demoted to the rank of a doorkeeper. Yesterday and today I was a personal attendant of the lord, but even though there are so many different posts, why, Father, was I made a doorkeeper? So one night I crept into the chamber of the lord to stab that hateful Saburō to death. But then I thought that if I killed him and committed suicide myself, nobody would know if Saburō had been right, or Kumajūmaru had been wrong or right. I thought that you, Father, would worry, so I pretended to be sick and returned home. Father, please, you are the one to decide your son’s destiny!” said Kumajūmaru. “I see. So this is what has happened. Do not worry. How is it possible to demote someone who served as a personal attendant to a doorkeeper? If so, I am glad I have been bearing a grudge about Mount Aso. I will get rid of that Akahoshi and restore your position as a personal attendant. Let me take care of everything and do not worry. Wife, quickly send a messenger to Hanada Tokizumi of the Ministry of Popular Affairs to tell him to come here quickly,” he said. “Straight away,” said the wife and quickly sent a messenger to Hanada Tokizumi of the Ministry of Popular Affairs. Wondering about the reason, Tokizumi hastened to the stable and prepared himself as quickly as possible. At the stable he put a bit of the *myōchin* brand¹⁸ in his horse’s mouth and since he did not have the time to do it, he pulled the horse out without even saddling it, and rushed to the house of his brother on the back of the unsaddled horse...

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¹⁸ *Myōchin* 明珍 is an armor brand name.